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ABSTRACT

In March and April 1994, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting conducted a focus group study of Native Americans to determine how they perceive public television. The focus groups were conducted by American Indian Telecommunications to determine the general viewing habits of Indians, their awareness of television programming, their response to Indian portrayals in media, and their perceptions of public television. Focus group participants were Native Americans age 25 or older, fluent in English, and located in Tahlequah, Oklahoma; Oakland, California; and the Zuni Pueblo in New Mexico, representing rural, urban, and reservation areas. Television viewing is an important part of most American Indian homes, although importance and how it was used varied across the three focus group sites. The most significant findings included: (1) education is public television's outstanding image; (2) public television is recognized for excellent preschool programming; (3) public television portrayals of Indians are fair and ethical; and (4) Native Americans desire more programming with relevance to Native people.
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Research Notes

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Native Americans' Perceptions of Public Broadcasting

As part of the service to ethnic and racial minorities, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting seeks information about minorities' usage and perception of public television and public radio. Recently the Corporation conducted research into the radio listening to public radio stations serving Native Americans. This year CPB extended the research into the television arena. There are no A.C. Nielsen statistics about Native Americans available in the mountains of Nielsen data on television viewing. To ascertain how public television is perceived by Native Americans CPB commissioned a focus group study.[1] Since little research exists about Native Americans and their usage of television, CPB was interested in finding out about the general viewing habits of Indians, their awareness of television programming, their response to Indian portrayals in media, and their perceptions of public television.

The most significant findings across all of the groups were as follows:

- **Education is public television's outstanding image.**
- **Public television is recognized for excellent preschool programming.**
- **Public television portrayals of Indians are fair and ethical.**
- **Native Americans desire more programming with relevance to Native people.**

Study design

According to the 1990 Census, there are nearly two million American Indians, Eskimos, and Aleuts living in the United States. Twenty-two percent of all Native Americans live on reservations and trust lands, 27 percent in rural areas, and 51 percent in cities. In 1990, more than half of the population

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[1] American Indian Telecommunications conducted the groups in March and April of 1994.

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lived in six states (in order of largest population: Oklahoma, California, Arizona, New Mexico, Alaska, and Washington). In order to select sites that best represented the varied locations of Native Americans, rural, urban and reservation sites were chosen. Tahlequah, Oklahoma, capital of the Cherokee Nation, was chosen for the rural area. The urban area selected was Oakland, California where the Inter-Tribal Friendship House is the center of the Oakland Indian Community for the approximately 40,000 Indians in the San Francisco Bay Area. The Zuni Pueblo in New Mexico was chosen to represent reservation inhabitants. Due, in part, to the relative remoteness of the Zuni reservation, the Zuni are especially known for having preserved a great deal of their culture.

With over 500 recognized tribes in the United States, this study should not be interpreted as a statistical representation of all Native Americans. Focus groups are qualitative research and the findings should be considered exploratory. Participants were selected from the following criteria: over age 25, fluent in English and of Indian identity. Groups were balanced by gender. In the cases of the Oakland and Tahlequah locations, as much variation as possible was attempted in the tribal affiliation of participants.

General television viewing habits

The results of the study suggest that television viewing is an important part of most American Indian homes. The importance of television and how it was used by the Native households varied between the three sites. Across all three groups the majority of viewers reported watching one to four hours of television per day. On average more television viewing was reported on weekends. However, in Oakland and Oklahoma, the pattern of turning on the TV and leaving it running regardless of actual viewing was more common than among the Zuni. The Zuni were also more likely to watch television with someone else. This pattern is most likely a function of the number of working television sets in the home, with the Zuni group participants having fewer TV sets. It may also reflect a Zuni emphasis on family, but this would need further study.

Zuni and Oklahoma groups expressed a significantly greater interest in controlling their children's viewing habits than the Oakland group. One explanation might be that the Oakland group had older children and the parents felt that controlling the teenagers' viewing was not possible. Among those parents who did control the children's viewing there was a concern that the media was very influential on children's behavior.

"I do try to screen what he watches -- he copies what goes on in the movies." Zuni woman

"There's too much violence on TV; kids act out what they see." Tahlequah participant

In terms of the children's favorite programs, the parents indicated that cartoons were most often watched. For very young children there was a preference for public television programs with *Barney and Friends* mentioned often. Situation comedies, such as *Blossom*, were also mentioned for older children, reflecting the television viewing habits of children in the total population.

Favorite programming among the adults also varied by location. In Oklahoma, the educational programs on public television were mentioned, with situation comedies a second favorite. The Oakland Indians reported that situation comedies were their favorite, followed by news and educational programs. The Zuni reported soap operas as their favorite. The marked difference for the Zuni is largely due to the fact that most of them work at home during the day making jewelry. The television is on in the daytime while they work.

Satisfaction with the programs available varied among the groups. The Oakland panelists were most satisfied with television and the majority of them subscribed to cable. Even though the majority of the Zuni participants received only two channels, they were surprisingly satisfied with their television choices. The Oklahoma panelists were least satisfied and complained about the sex and violence on television. The Zuni group was also worried about the sex and violence on television.

Perceptions of Native Americans in the media

When asked about the portrayal of Native Americans on television, the participants generally thought of the "cowboy westerns" and the negative stereotype.

"It's always a guy with a feather head dress, war paint, bare chested on a spotted pony...running from white people." Zuni man

However, there was a general consensus that the image had been improving over the last few years. Contemporary movies and television programs such as *Dances with Wolves, Geronimo, Northern Exposure* or *Surviving Columbus* were cited as modern improvements on the old stereotypical portrayals.

"If I miss [Northern Exposure] my whole week is just ruined. It is the only thing that I just watch normally. My favorite character is Marilyn, of course. And I just get mad if they don't even show her in the show." Tahlequah woman

In general, the groups did not recall many instances of Indians integrated into general programming, such as newscasters or hosts of programs. They cited a lack of Indians in the media as role models for Indian young people.

There was a discussion of portraying Indians as "real people" as opposed to always portraying them in traditional Native dress or focusing on the plains Indian images. In several instances people cited examples of tourists always asking to see teepees and feathers; this was particularly annoying to Zuni and Oklahoma respondents who pointed out that these stereotypical images were indicative of ignorance of white people about their culture.

When asked about the use of Native Americans in advertising, a mixed response was found. In general, in instances where Native Americans would benefit from the advertising, it was found to be agreeable. The continued stereotyping of Indians as they were hundreds of years ago was considered repugnant.

Public television viewing

Public television was most linked in the viewers' minds to its educational image. Specific programs that were most often cited included *Barney & Friends, Sesame Street,* nature programs, how-tos, *Austin City Limits,* programming featuring Native Americans, and documentaries. Weekly series such as *NOVA, Frontline, Mystery* and *Masterpiece Theatre* were also mentioned.

The educational image extended to the how-to programming.

"You learn a few things, the type of programs with woodworking." Zuni man

Public television was also cited as an alternative to the networks in terms of the amount of sex and violence that proliferated on other channels.

When asked "What kind of people do you think watch PBS?", the Oklahoma group thought that the programming attracted children and adults but not teenagers and younger adults. The Oakland group thought that PBS was for educated people, and white, middle-class people. In the Zuni group, the participants thought that it was for everyone, the largest market possible.

Most participants said they learned about what was on public television from the newspaper or the TV listing supplement. Few participants had ever donated to their local station and most did not know about the local programming guide. The second most common way of finding out what was on was through the promotions on the channel itself. In the Zuni group, friends and family were also a source of information about programming.

When asked what they did not like about public television, a few people mentioned the pledge drives. British programming was also mentioned by some people as a dislike.

Occasionally viewers seemed to lack an awareness of the channel by channel number or the identification of the programming with public television. One man was buying *Barney* videotapes, but did not realize the

program aired on public television. Another participant did not know how to flip her television to the UHF channel that the public television station was on.

"Just looking at this [program guide], I guess we watch quite a bit of PBS. I didn't know that these shows were PBS! When I flip channels I watch them." Oakland woman

Public television portrayal of Native Americans

There was almost unanimous approval of public television portrayals of Native Americans as fair and ethical. Participants noted that they made a special effort to watch any programming featuring Native Americans on the channel. *Surviving Columbus* was mentioned in the groups with particular enthusiasm. When compared to other television channels, PBS was thought to be the best station for learning about and seeing Native people.

Participants suggested that programming about any Indians would be of interest. It did not matter if the programs were about other tribes or Native Americans in other geographic locations. Filming pow-wows was of interest to them. Suggestions for programming included talk shows with Indian hosts, news about topics with special interest to Native Americans and programs which showed other sides of the Indian personality, such as their sense of humor. It was suggested that a situation comedy about an Indian family would be a good idea; they felt that the serious Indian stereotype was faulty.

"Indians are funny, they always show us as serious but we're funny." Tahlequah participant

Also of interest would be cultural programming about Indian art and music.

They felt it was essential that Indian actors portray Indians. Of secondary importance was whether the program was produced or directed by a Native American. In all cases care should be taken to portray Native Americans in an authentic manner by including input from Native Americans.

While Native language was important to the participants and would be of interest, the Oakland and the Oklahoma participants raised the difficulty in airing programming in the many tribal languages on a national television service.[2]

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[2]The Corporation for Public Broadcasting supports public radio stations that broadcast bilingual programming to Native Americans.

Recommendations

Strengthen the link in Native people's minds between public television programming and the accurate portrayal of American Indians. The positive attitude toward PBS was often expressed after the discussion had prompted recollection of programming.

Promote public television programming through Native American institutions. Tribal governments, Indian health centers and urban Indian centers were good ways to reach Native Americans. Public radio stations, particularly the Native American stations, were also cited as a good forum.

Create new programs relating to Indian issues. Programming about current Indian affairs, Indian art, and Indian music were suggestions. Contemporary role models for native Americans were important. Programming with humor would be appreciated.

Increase awareness of the channel. For people in remote areas there may be signal problems or a lack of understanding about tuning in the channel. Posters in tribal centers would encourage use.

Continue to portray Native Americans with sensitivity. The positive images and the care taken to research Native Americans accurately was noted.

If you have questions about these data, please refer them to Janice Jones, voice (202) 879-9677, fax (202) 783-1019, or e-mail jjones@soul.cpb.org. We also welcome any comments and recommendations about how to make the data more useful to you.